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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to provide a factor analysis of the Omega Scale, a 25-item, Likert-type scale developed in 1984 to assess attitudes toward death and funerals and other body disposition practices. The Omega Scale was administered to 250 students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at two higher education institutions in Alabama. Demographic data, including a statement of each subject's religiosity, were also collected from the subjects. A principal component analysis and varimax rotation analysis of the Omega Scale data yielded four meaningful factors, as follows: (1) nontraditional, secular funeral preference accounted for 17.4 percent of the variance; (2) personal funeral arrangement preference accounted for 9.1 percent of the variance; (3) traditional funeral preference accounted for 8.7 percent of the variance; and (4) preferred disposition of the body accounted for 6.0 percent of the variance. Results indicate that the Omega Scale accurately measures students' attitudes in four different areas concerning death and body disposition. Several scale items need to be revised and/or omitted. A copy of the Omega instrument is appended. (TJH)

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# FACTOR ANALYSIS OF THE OMEGA SCALE: A SCALE DESIGNED TO MEASURE THE ATTITUDES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS TOWARD THEIR OWN DEATHS AND THE DISPOSITION OF THEIR BODIES.

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Abstract

A review of recent literature in the field of aging and death revealed the existence of no scale to assess the attitudes of college students toward their own deaths, burial practices, traditional vs. non-traditional funeral options, and preferences as to the disposition of their bodies after death. As part of preparation for a college course entitled The Psychology of Aging and Death, the Omega Scale, a 25-item, Likert-type scale, was developed in 1984 to assess these attitudes. Since that time data have been gathered in sufficient quantity to allow for a factor analysis of the Omega Scale as a part of scale validation procedures.

In the present study, data were gathered from administering the Omega Scale to 250 students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at two universities/colleges in Alabama. Demographic data were also collected, including a statement of the student's level of religiosity, and were used to describe the sample. These data will be used in future analyses and in further refinement of the Omega Scale.

A principal component analysis and subsequent varimax rotation analysis of the Omega Scale data yielded four meaningful factors. Factor 1, Non-traditional, Secular Funeral, accounted for 17.4% of the variance. Factor 2, Personal Funeral Arrangement, accounted for 9.1% of the variance. Factor 3, Traditional Funeral, accounted for 8.7% of the variance. And Factor 4, Preferred Disposition of The Body, accounted for 6.0% of the variance. A criterion of .40 was used to assign variables to factors and for factor interpretation. One scale item loaded on two factors, and four scale items failed to load (.40) on any factor.

These data indicate that the Omega Scale is measuring college students' attitudes in four different areas concerning death and the disposition of the body. Several scale items need to be revised and/or omitted in a refinement of the Omega Scale for use with college students.

Because of advances in medical science, improvements in nutritional standards, increased education of the population, and an emphasis on wellness within the population, the United States finds that it is an aging society. That is, the population is living longer, and in many cases better than did the population of several decades ago (Special Committee on Aging, 1985). With the increase in the proportion of older Americans, there is a concomitant increase in both undergraduate and graduate programs dealing with aging and death. One emphasis in any beginning course in aging and death is for the student to confront, experience, and, hopefully, resolve some of his/her personal feelings about aging and mortality. Kavanaugh (1972) states that there is a natural tendency for human beings to deny their mortality, even when faced with imminent death, such as in the case of a terminal illness. This tendency is a factor in people not preparing wills, and, particularly, in not preplanning what is to be done with their bodies after death. Simpson (1979) has indicated that arrangements for disposition of the person's body are often handled by relatives who are under emotional distress, ignorant of the deceased's wishes, and unexperienced in handling such matters. The current research focuses on providing a way for undergraduate college students enrolled in a course entitled The Psychology of Aging and Death to examine their own attitudes about death and the disposition of their bodies after death.

As preparation for an undergraduate college course entitled The Psychology of Aging and Death, the author reviewed recent literature to find a scale that would be appropriate for use with college students to assess their attitudes about death and the disposition of their bodies after death. The literature revealed no scale specific to this purpose. Therefore, a pilot study was undertaken in 1984 to construct the Omega Scale, an scale designed to measure the attitudes of college students to their deaths and what they would prefer to be the disposition of their bodies. Interviews were held with numerous college students, and a list of possible concerns emerged. From these concerns, there emerged an original list of 40 items, which were presented in a 5-choice Likert format. These questions were reviewed and critiqued by several upper level psychology classes at the University of Montevallo as to content, wording, clarity and appropriateness. This process produced the current Omega Scale of 25 5-choice Likert-format items. A pilot study was carried out by Arrington in 1986 in which the Omega Scale was administered to 122 college students. The results of the pilot study were presented as faculty-sponsored undergraduate research. The current study presents a factor analysis of the Omega Scale as a part of scale validation procedures and development. Sufficient subjects were administered the Omega Scale to make a factor analysis of the 25 scale items an appropriate technique to undertake (10 subjects per variable) (Kerlinger, 1973).

## Method

The Omega Scale was administered to 250 college students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at one college and one university in Alabama during 1984-1985. These subjects were not randomly selected, and the results of this study are not generalizable to any other sample or group of students. Of the 250 students in the sample, 87 were male and 160 were female, and 3 did not report. Further, the sample included 127 freshmen, 72 sophomores, 31 juniors, 15 seniors, and 5 who did not report.

The subjects' responses to the 25 Omega Scale items were factor analyzed using the FACTOR program of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences - X (SPSS, Inc., 1986). The principal components analysis yielded 8 factors which were then subjected to varimax rotation for factor clarity. Only Omega Scale items which loaded at .40 or better were retained for interpretation.

## Results and Analysis

Table 1 indicates the results of the varimax rotation. Four meaningful factors emerged from the rotation. As can be seen from the table, eight of the Omega Scale items loaded on Factor 1, Non-traditional, Secular Funeral, at a .40 criterion level or better. The Omega Scale items included in this factor are ones in which the subject is opting for a secular service or no service at all; being dressed casually for the final service with no desire for one's hair to be professionally styled and no makeup to be used to make one appear natural; and being buried in a simple wooden casket.

Factor 2 was named Personal Funeral Arrangements because it dealt with Omega Scale items reflecting the subject's preference to plan his or her own funeral. The six items represented by this factor include a stated preference to planning one's own funeral rather than wanting family to make arrangements; selection of one's own pallbearers; stating that one has a preference in how one is to be dressed for one's funeral; and a stated preference that happy music rather than somber music be played at one's funeral. It is interesting to note that item #10 indicating a wish for donations for to be made to a charity rather than being spent on funeral flowers loaded at .39 on Factor 2. It was not used, however, in the naming of the factor, even though its content follows the other items loading on this factor.

Factor 3, Traditional Funeral, included three Omega Scale items indicating preference for a closed-casket funeral and the presence of children at one's funeral. It is interesting to note that item #12, a preference for a large funeral at a funeral home, loaded at the highest level on this factor (.36). It was not used in the naming of this factor, even though its content follows the other items loading on this factor.

Factor 4, Preferred Disposition of the Body, included a stated preference for other than traditional funeral arrangements. Included were a stated preference for one's transplantable organs to be donated; a preference for cremation or the donation of one's body to be used for medical science; and, not surprisingly, the wish that no tombstone be placed in remembrance of one's life. Four Omega Scale items loaded at a .4 or better on this factor.

Four Omega Scale items, #10 (mentioned in Factor 2 above), #12 (mentioned in Factor 3 above), #11, and #13 did not load at the .40 criterion level on any of the four factors. Item #8 loaded on both Factors 1 and 4, and was not used in the naming of either factor.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to conduct an analysis of the factor structure of the Omega Scale. The four factors which emerged from varimax rotation of the principal components analysis offer a fairly clear and usable picture of what the Omega Scale is measuring in this sample of 250 college students. It would appear that these college students have preferences in the areas of their own funerals and what happens to their bodies after death. This sensitivity to one's own mortality is part of the course content in the course for which the Omega Scale was designed, The Psychology of Aging and Death. It would appear that, with minimal changes, the Omega Scale may be developed into an instrument which can be used, perhaps, in a pre- and post-course measurement of college students' attitudes toward their own death and what happens to their bodies after death.

The Omega Scale items which did not load significantly on any one of the four factors need to be omitted from the next version of the scale. It is evident from these results that this sample of college students did not have a clear preference of the type of traditional funeral service they wanted.

Since only 41.2 percent of the total variance is accounted for by the four factors described in this study, further analysis, after the omission of the four questions cited above, is needed. Continued scale validation procedures including measurement of internal consistency are planned. Also, analyses of the differences between males' and females' responses, and the differences in subjects' responses according to their stated level of religious belief are planned.

TABLE 1

VARIMAX ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS OF OMEGA SCALE ITEMS

| | FACTOR 1 | FACTOR 2 | FACTOR 3 | FACTOR 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Plan own funeral. | | .81 | | |
| 2. Family arrange. | | -.68 | | |
| 3. Pallbearers. | | .64 | | |
| 4. Secular service. | .60 | | | |
| 5. Clothes. | | .45 | | |
| 6. Casket closed. | | | -.83 | |
| 7. Cremated. | | | | .60 |
| 8. Family plot.* | | | | |
| 9. Casual attire. | .62 | | | |
| 10. Donations/flowers.* | | | | |
| 11. Private service.* | | | | |
| 12. Large funeral.* | | | | |
| 13. Simple graveside.* | | | | |
| 14. No service. | .50 | | | |
| 15. No religious speech. | .54 | | | |
| 16. Open casket. | | | .83 | |
| 17. Makeup used. | -.47 | | | |
| 18. Hair styled. | -.52 | | | |
| 19. Expensive casket. | -.51 | | | |
| 20. Simple casket. | .57 | | | |
| 21. Children attend. | | | .44 | |
| 22. Happy music. | | .50 | | |
| 23. Tombstone. | | | | -.51 |
| 24. Transplant. | | | | .63 |
| 25. Body donated. | | | | .60 |

Factor 1 accounts for 17.4% of total variance.
Factor 2 accounts for 9.1% of total variance.
Factor 3 accounts for 8.7% of total variance.
Factor 4 accounts for 6.0 of total variance.
Total variance accounted for by four factors = 41.2%.

*Items not loading at .40 criterion level on any factor.

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THE OMEGA SCALE

DIRECTIONS: Below you will find twenty-five statements designed to assess your attitudes toward your own death and funeral preferences. Please respond to <u>each item</u> by marking one number according to the following scale:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| S. Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | S.Disagree |

1. I would prefer to plan my own funeral while I am still alive.
2. I would prefer to let my family arrange my funeral upon my death.
3. I would prefer to select my own pallbearers.
4. When I die, I would prefer a secular service rather than a religious service.
5. I have a preference regarding the clothes my body is dressed in for my funeral.
6. When I die, I would prefer that my casket be closed before and during the funeral service.
7. When I die, I would prefer my body to be cremated.
8. When I die, I would prefer to be buried with members of my family in a family plot.
9. When I die, I would prefer to be buried in casual attire rather than "dressed up."
10. When I die, I would prefer that donations be made in my name to a charity rather than flowers being sent.
11. When I die, I would prefer a private service with only immediate family members present.
12. When I die, I would prefer a large funeral at a funeral home.
13. When I die, I would prefer that all of my friends and relatives attend a simple graveside service.
14. When I die, I would prefer to have no sort of service at all.
15. When I die, I would prefer that close friends speak at my funeral service rather than a religious representative.
16. When I die, I would prefer that my casket be open before and during the funeral service.
17. When I die, I would prefer that make-up be used on my face to make me look natural.
18. When I die, I would prefer that my hair be professionally styled before the funeral.
19. When I die, I would prefer to be buried in an expensive casket.
20. When I die, I would prefer to be buried in a simple wooden casket.
21. When I die, I would prefer that children be allowed to attend my funeral.
22. When I die, I would prefer that happy music be played at my service rather than somber music.
23. When I die, I would prefer that a tombstone be placed on my grave.
24. When I die, I would prefer that any of my usable organs be donated for transplants.
25. When I die, I would prefer that my body be donated to a medical school for educational purposes.